

9201

Coues

Compliments of
the Author.

720.9

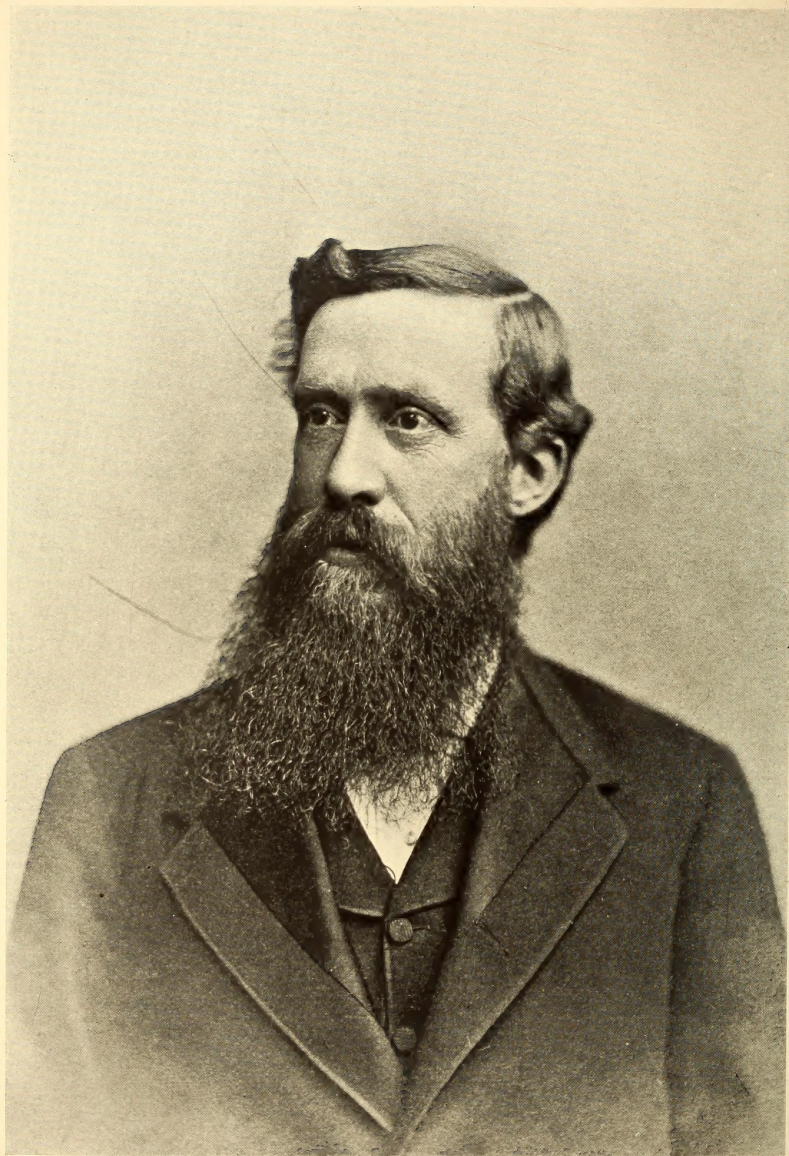
QL
31
C74E44
1901
SLRA

in 'THE AUK,' Vol. XVIII, No. 1, January, 1901.]

IN MEMORIAM: ELLIOTT COUES.

BORN 9th SEPT. 1842.—DIED 25th DEC. 1899.

anil
BY D. G. ELLIOT, F. R. S. E., ETC.



Sincerely yours,
Allen Coates.

QL
31
C74E44
1901
SZRA

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XVIII.

JANUARY, 1901.

No. 1.

IN MEMORIAM: ELLIOTT COUES.¹

BORN 9th SEPT. 1842.—DIED 25th DEC. 1899.

BY D. G. ELLIOT, F. R. S. E., ETC.

IN THE life of every nation, society or individual, no matter how peaceful, prosperous or happy the record of the past may have been, no matter how encouraging and bright the future may be for further advancement, increased progress and greater achievements in the path that always leads onward and upward, toward the ultimate fulfillment of the highest destiny that may be attained, in the varying shifting career that all must follow while accomplishing the pilgrimage of earth, yet in the experience of all even amidst the rush of a restless activity, there comes a time to mourn. A time when the daily duties are temporarily neglected or wholly laid aside, when the engrossing pursuits that occupy the thoughts and call for the utmost energies of man's nature cease for the moment to interest the mind, when the smile vanishes and joyous laughter no longer cheers the heart, when the voice sinks to a whisper low and soft, as the sense of some irreparable loss comes with stunning force to overwhelm the soul. To this Society, to all its individual members, and to some of us

¹ An address delivered at the Eighteenth Congress of the American Ornithologists' Union, Cambridge, Mass., Nov. 13, 1900.



in a peculiar and intimate relationship such a time has surely come, for as we are gathered here to-day, one engaging presence, one vitalizing force, one attractive personality, one brilliant mind is no longer in our midst, to grace, strengthen and assist us in our deliberations, and in the accomplishment of duties that must be met. Who shall measure the extent of the loss sustained by various branches of scientific and historical research, by this and kindred societies, by those of us who have parted from an intimate friend and colleague of many vanished years, as well as the younger men just entering upon the scientific field, in the recent death of our former President and late colleague, Elliott Coues. No one occupied a more prominent position in our midst than he and no one held it by a stronger claim founded on exceptional ability, in brilliant work successfully accomplished.

On September 9th, 1842, in the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Elliott Coues was born, and as soon as he could exhibit a preference for any object, his taste for ornithology was manifested, and even when only able to toddle about the nursery, a poster of one of the old style menageries rendered him oblivious to all other attractions and no book nor story interested him unless animals were their subjects. So early did the tastes and preferences that were to be the chief controlling influences of his life declare themselves. When he was eleven years of age his father, Samuel Elliott Coues, removed to Washington, in which city our late colleague was destined to pass a large part of his life, and where some of his most important works were to be written. For a time he attended Gonzaga College, a Jesuit Institution, and where, to one of his ardent temperament, the gorgeous ritual of the Romish church would be apt to make a deep impression, but his was to be an energetic life that demanded a wide field for its activity, and could not be pent amid cloistered shades or cathedral aisles. In his early days he was rather inclined to neglect the classics, replying once to a remonstrance of his father, "I only want just enough of these things to facilitate my other work," but later he appreciated the importance of a thorough knowledge of the ancient tongues and they had no more earnest advocate than himself. At the age of seventeen he entered Columbia College, now Columbian University, took his degree of

A. B. in 1861, Honorary M. A. in 1862, became a Medical Cadet in 1862, M. D. in 1863 and Acting Assistant Surgeon, United States Army, in the same year and Assistant Surgeon in 1864. When he passed his examination for the United States Army medical corps he was obliged to tell them he was not of age, and he was appointed a volunteer surgeon for one year before he could receive his commission and that year he passed at Mount Pleasant Hospital near Washington. For seventeen years he continued in the service of the United States and was made a brevet Captain, resigning in 1881 in order to devote himself entirely to his scientific and literary pursuits.

During his army life he was stationed at various posts, mostly those situated in the western part of the United States, and he was also attached to some of the most important Government Surveys of the Territories and little known parts of our country, such as the one under the command of Dr. F. V. Hayden, and that of the Northern Boundary Commission which surveyed the forty-ninth parallel westward from the Lake of the Woods. In these great expeditions he served as surgeon and naturalist, and gained in the field that intimate knowledge of our birds and mammals which was to make him in the near future one of the most illustrious naturalists of our country and of our time. He had now become so absorbed in his scientific pursuits that the monotonous routine of an army post was most distasteful, and when he was detached from the surveying expeditions and ordered back to his first station at Fort Whipple, Arizona, he endeavored to obtain a different assignment, one more congenial to him and better adapted for his scientific work, and when this proved impossible he resigned from the army and took up his abode in Washington, where he resided until his death.

Although he was a writer on many and various subjects, his first scientific work was done in ornithology, and as early as 1861, when he was but nineteen years of age, he made his debut as an author in a well-conceived and executed paper, that would have been highly creditable to a far more experienced hand, entitled 'A Monograph of the *Tringæ* of North America.' In his scientific studies Coues was fortunate in having for his mentor the late Professor Baird and between them the strongest

friendship existed and which only terminated with the death of the senior naturalist. From this period Coues's contributions to literary, scientific and philosophic subjects never ceased, for his energies were unlimited and he became one of the most prolific writers of our day. In 1869 he was elected Professor of Zoölogy and Comparative Anatomy in Norwich University, Vermont, but the duties of army life prevented him from accepting this position, but after he retired from the service of the United States he accepted the chair of anatomy at the National Medical College in the medical department of Columbian University, Washington, where he lectured acceptably for ten years. He was also one of the contributors to the Century Dictionary, and had editorial charge of General Zoölogy, Biology and Comparative Anatomy, and furnished some 40,000 words to this monumental work as his share of the enterprise; devoting to it the greater part of his labor for seven years. Another immense undertaking to which he devoted some years of painstaking work was a 'Bibliography of Ornithology,' certain instalments of which alone have been published, the greater portion still remaining in manuscript. He also began a 'History of North American Mammals,' but though considerable progress with it was accomplished nothing was ever published.

From 1861 to 1881 he completed 300 works and papers, the major portion devoted to ornithology; and although he always kept up his interest in that science and was more or less an active contributor to it all his life, his later years were more particularly devoted to historical research. The titles to his scientific writings of all kinds, minor papers, reviews and special works, number nearly 1,000, and he was the author or joint author of 37 separate volumes. The work by which he will probably be best known and remembered, and which has had above all others the most important influence on ornithology in our own land, is his 'Key to North American Birds,' a work that in its conception and the masterly manner in which it is carried out in all its details stands as one of the best if not *the* best bird book ever written. His knowledge of North American mammals was as extensive and intimate as was that of our birds, and the 'Fur Bearing Animals,' published in 1877, as well as the Monographs on the Muridæ,

Zapodidæ, Saccomyidæ, Haplodontia and Geomyidæ in the 'North American Rodentia,' also issued in 1877, bear ample witness to this fact. It is impossible, however, in a comparatively brief address to enumerate the titles of his works and to this audience they would seem like twice told tales, for with the more important you are thoroughly familiar, and the minor ones are being constantly met with and referred to by you in the pursuit of your investigations.

We know what he has done in Natural Sciences, and although he rests from his labors, and the eloquent tongue is silent and the still more eloquent pen lies motionless never more to perpetuate the virile thoughts that struggled for expression in the active mind, yet his works remain and speak with no uncertain tones for him. I would, however, pass from the consideration of him as an author and facile writer, and present him to you as the man, as he really was, for although many persons were acquainted with Coues few I believe really knew him. It is now nearly forty years ago, when on a visit to Professor Baird in Washington, one evening, in company with my old friend Dr. Gill, I first met Elliott Coues. He was then in his teens, a student of medicine, frank, simple, honest and confiding, with a boy's generous impulses, and the glorious enthusiasm of the ornithologist manifest in speech and action. The friendship then formed continued without a break or a hasty word ever having been exchanged with tongue or pen throughout all the intervening years. And yet we thought very differently on many subjects; but such was our confidence in each other's honest intention and unreserved frankness that we could, and did many times, argue on different sides, both orally and in writing, with an energetic earnestness that would have been highly dangerous to our continued friendship if we had not understood each other so well. And first among his most eminent characteristics was his love of truth, and he was constantly striving with all the force of his energetic nature to search it out and take its teaching to himself wherever he might find it, careless where it might lead him or what preconceived views or opinions it might overthrow or destroy. He believed with Carlyle that "there is no reliance for this world or any other but just the truth, there is no hope for the world but just so far as men find

out and believe the truth and match their own lives to it." It was therefore in his search for truth and an attempt to apply the principles of physical science to psychical research that in 1880 he became affiliated with the Theosophical Society of India and was elected President of its American Board of Control, and was continued in that office for several years. He was much interested in the subject and investigated its principles and methods with his usual thoroughness, even visiting Europe in company with Madame Blavatsky and other prominent members of the sect, and his connection with this and kindred societies resulted in the production of several publications such as 'Biogen' and the 'Dæmon of Darwin.' But the knowledge that he gained of this interesting but peculiar doctrine was not of that satisfying character as to cause him to hold fast to its tenets, nor to enable him to retain his respect for its leaders, and although he gives no reasons for the action, yet in the memorandum in which he records his election as President in 1885 and his reelection in the following year, with characteristic frankness he states that he was expelled from the Society in 1889. Those of us who have little sympathy with the claims asserted by the disciples of Theosophy can not but regard his expulsion from the Society as having conferred a greater honor upon him than his election to the Presidency, and can easily imagine the action he may have taken in the Council to cause such a result after he finally satisfied himself that the doctrine could not substantiate its claims. He detested shams of all kinds and hurled the full force of his invective against those who had proved themselves unworthy or who strove to appear entitled to more than was their due.

As a critic in certain lines he was unrivaled and exhibited the highest practice of the art in his reviews, dwelling most upon what was meritorious in the treatment of the subject before him, for he believed true criticism was to seek that which was praiseworthy rather than something to condemn. But no one could be more caustic in his treatment, nor wield a sharper weapon, when he found that praise would be misapplied and it would be kinder to act as the skillful surgeon does, create wounds in order that the patient's recovery might be more sure and lasting. Rarely, however, for one who published so much, was he severe in his

writings, though none had the power to be more so, but when from whatever the cause that influenced him he permitted himself to indulge in phrases that would be remembered and might possibly leave a sting, he set down 'naught in malice,' but employed a phraseology that he honestly believed was best suited to the case in hand, and after some such severe articles had been issued, he has spoken to me in the kindest way of the author of the work or act he had so criticised or condemned, apparently entirely unconscious that it could possibly affect any friendly relations or be the means of any estrangement. It was the sentiment advanced, or the conclusion reached, that was the object of his attack, not the individual who was the author. In all his critical reviews there is no thought of self, but only desire to do justice to his subject and to its author, and if anything could be charged against him on this point, it was an evident inclination always to find something to praise.

In his scientific writings he was always extremely lucid, and conservative in his methods, and he had but little sympathy for the hair splitting and microscopic variations in the appearance of animals, that is the joy and delight of some naturalists in these later days. He was a scholar and knew his Greek and Latin, and with a scholar's instinct and abhorrence of incorrect phraseology, he strove with all his might to inculcate not only in his own scientific writings, but in those of others the true principles of etymology and philology, and both by tongue and pen, in the keen analytical style of which he was an undisputed master, he strove with all the force of his energetic personality against the unfortunate and mistaken doctrine that the perpetuation of errors can ever be permissible, much less commendable. He possessed a command of language gained by few and the beauty of his style and his felicity of expression has created numerous pen pictures of the habits and appearances of our wild creatures that have never been excelled by any writer, if indeed they have been equalled.

While a keen and just critic himself, he was very sensitive regarding the opinion of others towards his own productions, and sought the approbation of those who were bound closely to him either by earthly ties or an intimate friendship, or whose knowledge

of the subject under consideration caused their opinion to be of special value. This extreme sensitiveness is best illustrated by an act committed in his youthful days, when after having labored for several years upon a work on Arizona, on reading his manuscript to one, who, if not competent to judge of the importance of his labors, he had the right to expect would exhibit sympathy for his efforts, and who must at least have been impressed with its thoroughness and beauty of diction, yet, was only able to consider its value as a commercial asset and therefore commented upon it so unfavorably and with such strength of expression, that, utterly disheartened at the want of appreciation for that which had been so long a labor of love and of which he was so proud of his ability to produce, on the impulse of the moment he cast the 'copy' into the fire where it was consumed, and then suffered a severe attack of illness in consequence of his loss by his hasty act.

Of a most affectionate disposition he sought and enjoyed the society of his friends and those with sympathetic tastes, and although he possessed strong convictions and firm opinions, yet no one more readily yielded to the views of another whose opportunities to reach a correct decision had been greater than his own, and this was always effected with a courtesy that caused his friendly opponent to regret he could not himself yield and reverse their positions. He loved science and scientific work and scorned to employ his talents and his knowledge merely for financial considerations, and although he could command large sums for his labor, he preferred to devote himself to pure science which, if less remunerative pecuniarily, achieves a more lasting result, and one of greater honor.

After all these years of scientific work his thoughts and labors turned to a new channel, that of historical research, and the last eight or ten years of his life were devoted to editing the journals of the early explorers of our continent, and he made many long and wearisome journeys over the various routes taken by these hardy pioneers in order to familiarize himself with the country traversed and locate the many places mentioned, but which had no designation on any published map. His former army life and his great experience as a naturalist eminently fitted him for this task, and probably no one could have proved himself so compe-

tent to fulfill this duty. The first of these works was that of the Expedition of Lewis and Clarke which appeared in 1893, followed in 1895 by the Expedition of Zebulon M. Pike. In 1897 came the Henry & Thompson Journals, in 1898 appeared the Fowler Journal and the Narrative of Charles Larpentuer, forty years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri; and during this year The Diary of Francisco Garces, on the trail of a Spanish Pioneer, in all 15 volumes. All of these books bear the impress of his most conscientious care and wonderful minuteness of annotation, and it is to Coues more than to any other, that the original sources of the early explorations of the western portion of our country, beyond the Mississippi, are preserved.

It was during an arduous journey in New Mexico and Arizona in the summer of 1899, undertaken, as he wrote me, as a "still hunt for old Spanish MSS." and to refresh his memory of the country described by Francisco Garces, and render still more effective his editing of the Diary in his possession that Coues's splendid physique and robust health that for so long seemed to defy fatigue and exposure gave way, and he was brought to Santa Fé in a rather critical condition, where for a month he was very ill, but in September he came to Chicago. He seemed to be getting better and at my last interview with him, during which his condition was freely discussed, although he fully appreciated the gravity of his case, yet he expressed the hope, and perhaps he thought it was clearly among the possibilities, that he might be present at the last meeting of this Society in Philadelphia. Regarding him, as I then did, as in a critical condition I could not share this hope, although I encouraged him in his belief, or what seemed to be his belief, for Coues had been too long a skilled medical practitioner to try and deceive himself, but from his references to his attendant physician it was clearly apparent that he preferred to advance the opinion of his medical adviser, of whom he spoke in the highest terms, rather than any of his own. He was greatly changed in appearance, but the old fire and enthusiasm, that I had so often admired and not infrequently contended with in friendly conflict during so many years, was not a whit abated, and he spoke with all his old time interest of the work he had himself in view and of that of others. But the voice was feeble

and the frame was weak, and he was filled with a restlessness that was foreign to him. But when I bade him an adieu, which was to be our last on earth, he was cheerful and spoke hopefully of meeting soon again. As you all know, his condition became more serious after he arrived at his home in Washington and an expert examination at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore gave but little hope for the preservation of his life. During these last days I received a number of letters from him explaining frankly his condition and how few were his chances for life, and just before submitting to the operation came one virtually bidding me farewell and announcing the close of our correspondence that had extended over many years. On the sixth of December the operation was performed and for a short time there was a probability that his life would be prolonged, but it was not to be, for he had finished his work and he was to rest from his labors. Throughout his illness he exhibited the natural bravery of spirit habitual to him; not a murmur or complaint of the excessive and lasting pain, but gentle and courteously appreciative of every attention, and at the last overcoming for an instant the weakness that denoted the approach of that moment when his freed spirit should depart and soar above all earthly things, he raised himself in his bed, and with all the old time vigor of voice exclaimed, "Welcome! oh, welcome beloved death," and sinking backwards on the pillow he was at rest. Nevermore shall you welcome to your midst this courteous gentleman, who was the considerate friend, the able counsellor, the chivalrous debater, the one most capable of leadership, yet always willing to yield to another, the trained scientist, the accomplished anatomist, the able naturalist, the conscientious historian. His was a life of intense activity and that which his hand found to do he did with all his might; and of none can it be more appropriately said, "*Nihil tetigit quod non ornavit.*"

Coues, as may be readily supposed, was the recipient of many scientific honors, and he was an Honorary or Active member of a very large number of societies, both in this country and in Europe, and at the time of his election to our National Academy he was, I believe, its youngest member. The list of scientific societies with which he was connected numbers between fifty and

sixty, far too many for me to attempt to give their titles at this time, yet none of them was so distinguished but that it received as well as conferred an honor by having his name upon its rolls. As a naturalist Coues will always hold the highest rank in the estimation of all who are familiar with his works, and in that galaxy of eminent names which sheds so great a brilliancy on the scientific annals of our own land, none shall appear in the years to come more lustrous than that of our late distinguished colleague and friend. But the brilliant mind no longer teems with thoughts of earth, and the hand that executed its commands lies motionless and we, who are drawing near to that shining portal through which he has so lately passed, and from whose farther side no steps are ever retraced by any one of mortal birth, may never look upon his like again, whose pen was the 'pen of a ready writer,' fit instrument to convey and render permanent the eloquence of thought, beauty of diction, and facility of expression, of Nature's illustrious Disciple and Interpreter.





Syracuse, N. Y.
Stockton, Calif.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION LIBRARIES



3 9088 00862 7929

